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ABSTRACT

Although summer writer's conferences have added adolescent literature to their programs and many professional educators have recommended a required course in adolescent literature for all high school English teachers, adolescent literature is still neglected, especially by English teachers. All students at some time in their literary growth enjoy adolescent literature; consequently, English teachers need to be aware both of the various stages of literary appreciation and of students' interests at different ages. Such studies as those by J. Harlan Shores on reading interests, as reported in an article in "The Reading Teacher" (April 1964), and Margaret Early's "Stages of Growth in Literary Appreciation" (in the book, "Teaching English in Today's High Schools," ed. Dwight Burton and John Simmons) ought to be a part of every teacher's background. (JM)

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THE RELEVANCE OF ADOLESCENT LITERATURE

Geraldine E. LaRocque

In the field of medicine there has been for quite a number of years a branch called pediatrics; there has also been a division called geriatrics. Recently the *Wall Street Journal* reported, "Now a new kind of physician is specializing in the problems of adolescents—those between childhood and maturity." [2] However, more than a decade ago the *New England Journal of Medicine* had pointed out that adolescent medicine was a neglected area and said that "the field is particularly important, marking as it does the transition from girl to woman and from boy to man." [3]

It seems that in literature much the same kind of situation has prevailed; there has been a recognized field of children's literature as well as adult literature; and as some pediatricians were judged to be better doctors than other pediatricians, so some children's literature was evaluated as being of higher quality than other children's literature, with some titles earning the designation "children's classic." Adult literature also has had its critics who judged the offerings as popular, serious, and classic.

But for some reason, all the so-called adolescent literature has been deemed generally unworthy, particularly by English teachers. Typical of this kind of reaction is that of the Commission on English of the College Entrance Examination Board. The Commission states in the book *Freedom and Discipline,* "Claims are frequently advanced for the use of so-called 'junior books,' a 'literature of adolescence,' on the ground that they ease the young reader into a frame of mind in which he will be ready to tackle something stronger, more adult. The Commission has serious doubts that it does anything of the sort." [4]

Adolescent literature, like adolescent medicine, addresses itself particularly to the culture and interests of the adolescent. The new doctor of adolescent medicine occasionally will have to treat the diseases of children or adults as they appear in adolescent patients, but he will concern himself mainly with those medical problems peculiar to the adolescent. Similarly the high

[2] Earl C. Gottschalk, Jr., "M.D.'s for Teen-Agers," **Wall Street Journal,** vol. LXXVIII (January 5, 1968), p. 1.

[3] **Ibid.,** p. 1.

[4] Commission on English, **Freedom and Discipline in English** (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1965), p. 49.

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school English teacher faces students whose reading abilities and interests limit them to books written for younger children while other students read adult material without difficulty. However, beweeen these two groups are those students who are trying to make the transition from children's books to mature reading through the medium of adolescent literature, which might be defined as that literature written especially *for* young people—especially *for* teenagers—not adult literature or children's literature that has been adopted by the adolescent. *The Little Prince,* a children's story, is loved by some adolescents; other adolescents enjoy such adult novels as *Lord of the Flies* and *A Separate Peace,* but these books were not written primarily for the teenaged audience as *Seventeenth Summer* and *The Outsiders* were.

That body of literature written especially for the adolescent is growing both in quantity and in quality. The growth in quantity can partially be explained by the increasing market for adolescent literature. One-fifth of the population in the United States today is between ten and twenty years of age; and that, no doubt, influences the number of adolescent books being published. Also, adolescents have money to spend on books and other investments. One of the recent adolescent books *The Teenager's Guide to the Stockmarket* obviously takes into consideration the financial solvency of teenagers.

The quality, as well as the quantity of books for adolescents has been steadily increasing ever since the Second World War. One can see improved quality in content, characterization, and writing. The content and character delineation of the best current novels for adolescents stress reality in a way that early adolescent novels did not. John R. Tunis was one of the first writers to deal with the serious-theme novel for young people, but at the present he has more colleagues writing with deliberate attention to style about real racial and social problems than he had when he began. Today these writers tell it like it is.

People everywhere are taking adolescent literature more seriously. Only recently, the summer writers' conferences have added adolescent literature to their programs, indicating their recognition of the importance of this type of writing. Early this year the Committee on Adolescence of the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry published a book called *Normal Adolescence.* The members of the committee state, "Of major importance are the facts that adolescence is a well-delineated stage of development and that adolescents form a special self-conscious status group. This is by no means true in all cultures." [5] In recog-

[5] Committee on Adolescence of the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, **Normal Adolescence** (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 39.

nition of the existence of this special sub-group in the United States, more and more space is being devoted to reviews of books for young people in such publications as the *Saturday Review* and the *New York Times.*

Just as the *New England Journal of Medicine* recognized the importance of ephebiatrics a decade ago, so some English educators have for a long time recognized the importance of adolescent literature. For example, such superior teacher trainers as Dora V. Smith of the University of Minnesota were advocating judicious use of adolescent literature in the early 1940's. *The National Interest and the Teaching of English* published in 1961 deplored the fact that English teachers in the United States had not been trained in adolescent literature. In 1964 the subsequent volume, *The National Interest and the Continuing Education of Teachers of English,* also made the point that only 15.9% of the universities that trained English teachers then actually required either a children's literature or an adolescent literature course. In 1963 Alfred Grommon, president of the National Council of Teachers of English, edited a book sponsored by the NCTE entitled *The Preparation of Teachers of English.* It, too, suggested that a course in adolescent literature be made a requirement for all high school English teachers. The April, 1968, *English Journal* devoted most of its space to guidelines and suggested programs for the training of teachers of English; and adolescent literature was an important recommendation in many of them.

Why is it then, that not only is adolescent literature not a requirement, it is not even offered in many of our teacher training programs in English? Is it that we as teacher trainers don't know the field ourselves? If that is the reason, there is a simple answer to the problem. If a person is asked to teach a course in Chaucer when American Literature has been his specialization, what does he do? He prepares himself in Chaucer by research and reading. The same can be done with adolescent literature! Such reading should be a part of the professional reading that is absolutely necessary to keep up in the field of English education. And reading literature written for the young adult keeps the English specialist honest. When he reads a science fiction book and science fiction is not his particular interest, he may experience what some students feel when they have to read an assigned book like *The Scarlet Letter.*

Maybe a second explanation for why we have not offered courses in adolescent literature is that many of us as English educators have held the same attitudes toward it as the College Entrance Examination Board: adolescent literature has no place in the training of teachers or in the high school classroom.

I personally believe that a course in literature for the young adult is worthwhile and should be taught to pre-service English teachers. It is important to remember that a good deal of the adolescent literature that is published each year is inferior; however, that is true of most of the material published in all fields whether it be children's literature, adolescent literature, adult literature, science, history, or biology. Only a few books stand out in each area and adolescent literature is no exception.

I am reminded here that some literary critics and Marshall McLuhan, who claims that English teachers are always looking in a rear-view mirror, take the position that in the future a very limited number of people will read the classics and that most individuals will obtain their knowledge through other media. May I point out that in a sense it has always been a small group of people who have appreciated the best and most mature in any field. If we assume that English teachers have a responsibility to other youngsters besides the élite, who will be steeped in the best of our cultural heritage, then it sems that we as teacher trainers must acknowledge the importance of their knowing adolescent literature.

Granted that adolescent literature ought to be a part of every high school English teacher's basic knowledge, then how do we as English educators answer the teachers' question, "For whom is the adolescent book necessary?"

Perhaps the answer is that for almost every youngster at some time in his life there is a place for adolescent literature. Pre-service teachers may be interested in the theories and research which lead to that conclusion. Just as some children get chicken pox at four years of age, some at fifteen, and some as adults, some youngsters read adolescent books and tire of them earlier than others. There are many factors which determine when a youngster finds a certain kind of book appealing.

One of the best theories formulated for explaining these factors and differences is Margaret Early's.[6] Her theory deals with three stages of literary development. The first stage is unconscious delight, the second stage is self-conscious appreciation, and the third stage is conscious delight. Her thesis is that "the tage of unconscious enjoyment is the beginning of literary appreciation; it *cannot* be by-passed. Before readers are willing to work for a higher level of delight, they must be convinced that literature affords pleasure." [7] This is the stage where students like the formula story. They feel comfortable with the stero-

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[6] Margaret Early, "Stages of Growth in Literary Appreciation," **Teaching English in Today's High Schools**, ed. Dwight L. Burton and John S. Simmons, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1965), pp. 75-85.

[7] **Ibid., p. 80.**

typed plot. They don't want characters that are fully developed. They enjoy flat characters and plot, the understanding of which does not call for a great deal of effort on their part. Early expresses her belief that "teachers should remember that a reader of trash has the chance of improving his taste; a non-reading pupil has no taste to improve." [8] This is much like Daniel N. Fader's idea of hooking students on books first and then worrying about improving their taste afterward.

In the second stage of self-conscious appreciation "the reader gradually moves away from a simple interest in what happens and he asks why." [9] Margaret Early thinks that this is a dangerous stage because the teacher may push too hard when students reach this level. He may ignore his students' readiness to read and attempt to force literary appreciation upon immature readers or he may encourage students to repeat his responses instead of helping them to acquire an appreciation based on their experience with the work. These are the students who cannot judge literary works unless they know the author and have some idea of his place in literature. I. A. Richards' *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment* (1929) furnished evidence that his college students did not know what to say about a poem if they did not know who wrote it and when. They had little real "appreciation" of literature.

The last stage as formulated by Early, that of conscious delight, is the stage of conscious appreciation of what the structure, the style, the metaphor, and the symbols add to the theme and the work as a whole. Conscious delight is the epitome of literary appreciation, and there are some students who will never reach this stage. In science I personally have a very limited knowledge; however, my friends who specialize in various branches of science do not look upon me as inferior because I am not capable of truly appreciating the finer distinctions in their field. And we as English educators should try not to deprecate the teenagers who do not have the emotional maturity and ability to fully understand and enjoy such books as *Crime and Punishment* and *The Return of the Native.*

Other similar theories of literary appreciation and development are found in Dwight Burton's book *Literature Study in the High School,* which classifies adolescent literature as transitional literature, and in G. Robert Carlsen's *Books and the Teenage Reader* which, like the Burton volume, has excellent bibliographies for the person who is a novice in the field of adolescent literature.

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[8] Ibid., p. 80.
[9] Ibid., p. 80.

If we assume that during the early stages of literary appreciation, no matter at what age they occur, there will be a place for adolescent literature in the reading of most youngsters, then English teachers need to be aware of these stages and of students' interests at various ages. Studies of young people's reading interests have been made by such eminent psychologists as Robert Thorndike of Teachers' College, Columbia University. These studies indicate that age in spite of intelligence is important in determining interest. An obvious example is two fifteen-year-old girls: one, highly intelligent, the other fairly low in intelligence. Most girls of that age are interested in boys, and probaby both girls will enjoy romances or love stories in spite of their intellectual differences.

Future English teachers, the ones we are training today, ought to be familiar with studies like those of J. Harlan Shores, as reported in an article entitled "Reading Interests and Informational Needs of High School Students," *The Reading Teacher,* April, 1964. Shores has conducted a series of studies of the reading interests of elementary children, junior high school pupils, and high school students; he has, at the same time asked their teachers what they think the interests of their students are. Elementary school teachers report the interests of their students almost exactly as the students report them. In the junor high school there is a discrepancy between what the teachers report as the interests of their students and what the students report as their interests. In the senior high school the discrepancy between reported student interests and the teachers' perceptions of student interests is greater still.

Young English teachers-in-training need to be aware of these findings as well as informed about the history of literature. Interest, maturity, socio-economic status, background, subject matter, and reading ability—all these things influence the impact a book makes upon a student; and in the final analysis, the worth of a literary experience can be measured only in terms of its effect upon the individual human being. Taking into consideration all of the above factors, teachers may find that knowledge of adolescent literature will help them advise young people more intelligently in their choice of books for individual reading.

In the past, some English teachers in their unimaginatve interpretation of guided reading have not met the individual needs of students. They have often force-fed the very bright, highly motivated, middle-class student so that one wrote in his eleventh-grade year:

> I feel, however, that I have read too few of the works of the great authors and too few classics. Perhaps the reason for the lack of classics in my reading . . . is the stress that was

placed upon them in the seventh and eighth grades. A certain number of books had to be read within a given period and this amount of reading determined a single grade. In those two years I read many classics but I do not remember thoroughly enjoying one. Since then I have read only two classics. I do plan to read some more this year.

My main problem concerning reading is that I do not have enough time—I wish I had more spare hours for it. As it is now, about the only time I do read is before I go to bed as opposed to the Saturday mornings I used to devote to reading. For this reason I prefer not to have a ponderous searching novel to absorb.

We do not want our intelligent, eleventh graders to escape from the classics because they have been exposed too early, particularly when there are other worthwhile books available.

In addition to alienating bright young people, many literature teachers have neglected the needs of other types of students so that the *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* might be speaking directly to them when it states, "The quality of education offered by ghetto schools is diminished further by use of curricula and materials poorly adapted to the life-experience of their students." [10]

To guide many different kinds of students in their reading means that the English teacher must know books and must know students. We as English educators must not fail these young teachers, we must make it possible for them to lift the level of appreciation of all students, not just those gifted in English. We must help them learn about the excellent new books in all genres written for teenagers. My column, "Book Marks," which appears in the November, February, and May issues of the *English Journal* discusses newly published plays, poetry, novels, biographies, science, histories, discussions of art, and general nonfiction suitable for teenagers. The column also makes suggestions about the kind of student who might profit from the books.

The possibilities for books written for adolescents are great. Let me close with one example, Herbert Kondo's *Adventures in Space and Time* (Holiday House), a brief, extremely clear and readable discussion of Einstein's theories of special and general relativity.

The book begins with a concise summary of Einstein's life which has some natural appeal for the young adult because of Einstein's early apparent backwardness and his problems with college entrance examinations. The scientifically precocious junior high student will have no trouble reading this book in spite of the technical vocabulary, and the senior high school boy or girl planning to major in humanities will find it a

[10] Otto Kerner, Chairman, Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (New York: Bantam, 1968), p. 43.

pleasant way to enlarge his scientific horizons. For the older and perhaps more scientifically sophisticated student, an annotated bibliography suggests further reading. A delight to all readers are the illustrations by George Solonevich which demonstrate not only a highly distinctive style but also an imaginative artistic approach not often found in science books.

More students then ordinarily would be expected to read this type of book may be desirous of learning about Einstein's theories if there are other articles published in the next few months like the one entitled "Einstein Relativity Theory Challenged" which appeared in the *New York Times*, January 28, 1967, pages 1 and 12. The article makes clear that only the general theory of relativity is being questioned, but it is being challenged on the basis of a new theory which states:

> The effect of this flattening . . . is sufficient . . . to explain a significant portion of the orbital behavour of Mercury, the planet closest to the sun, without recourse to relativity. It was the precise conformity of Mercury's orbit to Dr. Einstein's prediction that was the chief pillar of his theory. If Dr. Dicke is correct, this pillar is undermined. (p. 12) [11]

When you as an English educator are teaching adolescent literature or are recommending an adolescent book for some youngster, be cheered by the following advice of Samuel Johnson:

> I am always for getting a boy forward in his learning; for that is a sure good. I would let him at first read *any* English book that happens to engage his attention; because you have done a great deal when you have brought him to have entertainment from a book. He'll get better books afterwards'.[12]

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[11] Geraldine E. LaRocque, "Book Marks: Summer Reading," English Journal, volume 56 (May, 1967), pp. 766-7.

[12] James Boswell, The Life of Samuel Johnson, Abridged (New York: Modern Library, 1952), p. 427.